

Berlin Wall Tumbles

The symbolic reunification of East and West Germany



- ♣ Soldiers build a section of the wall in 1961, under the supervision of East German officers.
- ♣ East and West Berliners celebrate New Year's Eve atop the partially demolished wall on December 31, 1990.

“The feeling in the air was electric, as if some great force had been let loose.”

Witness

The 96-mile-long wall around West Berlin, the Allied enclave within the Communist-run Democratic Republic of Germany, had gone up overnight on August 13, 1961, erected to prevent the steady exodus of East Germans to the more prosperous West. Over the ensuing thirty-eight years more than one hundred people were killed trying to cross the wall, a hated symbol of the repressive regime.

The East German president Erich Honecker commented in the spring of 1989 that the wall would stand for another hundred years, but that summer his regime, one of the most oppressive and unpopular, began to suffer floods of emigrants, initially via Hungary to Austria. In October the veteran Honecker resigned. His successors, faced with huge demonstrations, realized that they would receive no external help, and on November 9, the leader of East Berlin's Communist party, Günter Schabowski, announced that the border would be opened immediately for “private trips abroad.” Nobody had told the border guards, but a flood of East Berliners tried to get through that evening anyway; people climbed on the wall at the Brandenburg Gate, staging a massive celebration and hacking at it with pickaxes, some taking chunks of it away as souvenirs. The gates were opened, and Easterners were enthusiastically welcomed into the West. The next day, demolition works began. It was the symbolic end of the Cold War, and the practical end of the postwar division of Germany.

In October 1990, East and West Germany were formally unified and all travel restrictions dropped. The wall had vanished almost completely by 1991, but a red line was painted on the pavement at the bygone “Checkpoint Charlie” to mark the wall's former course. **JS**

